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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [SCUL](#) [UP](#)

SUBJECT: UKRAINE: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES MIGRATION,  
INTERETHNIC ISSUES, AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM WITH SCNR

Classified By: Ambassador for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During a meeting with the Ambassador, Oleksandr Sagan, recently-appointed Chairman of the State Committee of Nationalities and Religions, discussed a wide variety of issues including inter-ethnic relations, the status of religious freedom, and migration policy -- all of which fall under his committee's purview. Sagan, who was previously an advisor to President Yushchenko on religious issues before taking this post in December 2007, described his policy and legislative initiatives to address issues such as the rights of the Crimean Tatars and other ethnic minorities, possible amendments to the law on religious freedom, and the creation of what he hopes will be an independent and more effective migration authority. He explained his support for a unified Orthodox Church, efforts to promote ethnic and racial tolerance, and plans to address the growing number of Muslim extremist organizations in Crimea.

¶2. (C) Comment: Sagan is highly regarded by our interlocutors in the field of religious freedom, which is not surprising because of his academic background - a PhD in religious studies - and experience as an advisor on religious issues to President Yushchenko. In addition, he appears to be a quick study and showed a firm grasp of other issues in his committee's broad and varied portfolio such as the need to improve migration policy, resolve interethnic tension, and deal with the growing signs of racial intolerance. Although he seemed to perpetuate some stereotypes regarding the Roma (mismanaging money) and did not support an immediate return of Torah scrolls to Jewish communities, he seemed open-minded and willing to engage the communities and civic society organizations involved in order to reach equitable solutions. His assertion that a unified Orthodox Church will unite Ukrainians is not realistic based on what our interlocutors tell us. We agree with him on the need to fix Ukraine's nearly dysfunctional migration system, but it will be important not to take sides in his fight with the Ministry of Interior (MOI) over the proposed establishment of an independent migration authority. End of Summary and Comment

Inter-Ethnic Issues - Assistance to Crimean Tatars and Roma  
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¶3. (C) Sagan told the Ambassador during a May 5 meeting that his committee had drafted a concept paper on ethnic policy, which he hopes will be followed by legislation. He explained that the concept paper outlines Government "financial and moral" support to the Crimean Tatar community in their status as returning displaced persons. The GoU had already provided \$3.2 million (16 million UAH) over the past years for the construction of four housing facilities in Crimea, utility infrastructure development for Crimean Tatar communities, and the construction of six schools with Crimean Tatar language instruction. He expressed concern that some Crimean Tatar politicians have been fomenting tension with the ethnic Russian majority. Sagan cited instances of land seizures by the Crimean Tatars and their subsequent refusal to negotiate

with authorities on returning the land as examples of their unwillingness to cooperate. He opined that ethnic policy is highly politicized and that he had been careful to take all ethnic groups into account, not just the Crimean Tatars, when developing his strategy.

14. (C) When asked about the status of Ukraine's Roma community, Sagan said that disagreement among leading Roma organizations in Ukraine had delayed the GoU's participation in a joint Council of Europe/European Commission project to assist the Roma. He explained that until the Roma community could agree on a single implementing organization, the GoU would withhold its portion of funding for the program. He observed that the Roma's "special" culture exacerbated their problems and gave examples such as a high truancy rate and mismanagement of Government money for housing. He added that although the Roma represent a small portion of Ukraine's overall population, the government had spent roughly 10 percent of its budget allocated for minorities on the Roma community.

#### Increase in Extremist Muslim Groups in Crimea

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15. (C) Sagan said that the SCNR planned to establish a department on Muslim extremist groups in Crimea. He said that the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) did not have an effective organization to cover this issue and that this "strategic mistake" had led to an increase in extremist organizations in Crimea. Sagan attributed the growing problem to Ukrainian Muslim clerics who were exposed to Wahabism while studying in Saudi Arabia and had returned to

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spread these ideas through organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir.

#### Inter-Agency Working Group to Fight Intolerance

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16. (C) As chairman of the newly-established interagency working group on countering xenophobia and interethnic/racial intolerance, Sagan attributed the rise in intolerance to the increase in migrants. He outlined the SCNR's plans to promote tolerance within Ukrainian society; especially among the youth. He described a strategy that included the introduction of tolerance classes at schools and universities, a public service message campaign promoting tolerance, and draft legislation to toughen penalties for hate crimes. In response to the Ambassador's question about MAUP, he said there had been a significant drop in number of its anti-Semitic publications in the past year and he was hopeful that its leadership had begun to move away from its anti-Semitic activities. (Embassy Note: MAUP is the Interregional Academy of Personnel Management, Ukraine's largest purveyor of anti-Semitic publications. End Note.)

#### Religious Freedom on Solid Ground

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17. (C) Sagan explained that religious freedom was well established in Ukraine, giving credit to the previous work of the SCNR and its predecessor organizations. He said that although the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations provided concrete protections, the SCNR had recently drafted a concept paper on governmental relations with religious organizations and was considering amending the current law. He wanted to establish a strategy before amending the law to prevent "political forces" from trying to restrict "sects", which he said could lead to limits on the freedoms of the Roman Catholic Church and Jehovah's Witnesses, among others.

#### United Orthodox Church will unite Ukrainian Society

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18. (C) Noting President Yushchenko's efforts to unite the Moscow and Kyiv Patriarchates of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Sagan argued that a unified church would help to unite Ukrainian society. He reassured the Ambassador that a unified church would not have a special status, like the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia. When asked by the Ambassador if the Government's efforts were interfering with the separation of church and state, Sagan reiterated that other religions would receive equal treatment, but a unified Orthodox church could help to counter the influence of Russia in Ukraine through the Moscow Patriarchate, which he said had been favored during the Kuchma Era and continues to promote Russian policies.

#### Restitution - Plans for Legislation, Torah Scrolls on Hold

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19. (C) Sagan told the Ambassador that the Ministry of Justice is drafting a law on religious property restitution. He explained that restitution had thus far been carried out by Government decree or decided by local municipalities, which in many cases had been carried out unevenly and in favor of the majority religious organization. Although most undisputed properties had already been returned, competing claims for the some properties, the lack of funds to relocate occupants of these buildings, and a lack of political will hindered resolution of the remaining restitution claims. When asked about the status of the torah scrolls currently held in the National Archives, Sagan replied that although the President issued a decree in late 2007 to return them to the Jewish community, there were difficulties in determining which Jewish community should get the scrolls and there was no legislative basis for transferring the scrolls held by the National Archives. Sagan added that legislation would need to ensure that the scrolls are not sold on the open market or transferred out of the country.

#### Need to Fix Migration Policy

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10. (C) Sagan acknowledged that Ukraine's migration policy was "not in a good situation" because five different government agencies share responsibility for its implementation. He confirmed that the SCNR has continued to manage refugee and asylum issues and told the Ambassador that it has drafted a law on refugees, which it will soon open for public comment. He explained that the SCNR and Ministry of Interior have differing views on the direction of migration policy, with the MOI seeking to control all migration related

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issues while the SCNR wants a separate migration service within the Presidential administration. Sagan said the SCNR is willing to transfer its authority over migration issues, but not to the MOI because it lacks the expertise and it would be a "step away" from European norms. He said the First Deputy Prime Minister Turchynov has sided with the MOI and he asked for U.S. support for the SCNR's position in dialogue with senior GoU leaders (not something the USG will do). Sagan added that it would be irresponsible to close off borders to the increasing number of migrants, as some anti-immigrant groups have proposed, and that Ukraine had to come to grips with the inflow of migrants who he said could bolster a declining work force due to an aging population and the exodus of young Ukrainians to economic opportunities in the West.

11. (U) Visit Embassy Kyiv's classified website:  
[www.state.gov/p/eur/kyiv](http://www.state.gov/p/eur/kyiv).  
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